

Glossary of Aboriginal Australian Terms

Following are words associated with Australian Aboriginal culture or used to describe Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal

Usually refers to the First Peoples of mainland Australia but excludes those of the Torres Strait region. Sometimes used to refer to both.

Aboriginality

Sometimes used to refer to Aboriginal people's identity, or the combination of cultural heritage, spirituality and relationship with the land.

APY

Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) is a large Aboriginal local government area located in the remote north west of South Australia.

Artefact

Any object made or modified by Aboriginal people, often stone tools or wooden objects. A group of artefacts (especially stone tools) located on the ground surface is referred to as artefact scatter.

Assimilation

A 19th century idea that Aboriginal people should become 'white', convert to Christianity and learn how to work and live as Europeans. From the 1930s assimilation became Australian government policy.

ATSI

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Note that this abbreviation is not liked by many Aboriginal people due to its use in discriminating contexts.

Blaktivist

An Aboriginal (Black) activist is a person who is very informed about current events and developments and doesn't hesitate to protest or make their voice and opinion known.

Bunggul

A north Australian (Yolngu) word describing a song with dance, or ceremonial dance performance.

Community

Important elements of a community are country, family ties and shared experience. Community is about connection and belonging, and is central to Aboriginality. Aboriginal people may belong to more than one community.

Corroboree

Corroboree is an Eora word that has become part of Australia's identity. It describes a place of ceremony and creative expression, a transformative gathering.

Country

When Aboriginal peoples talk about "Country" they describe the lands, waterways and seas to which they are connected. The term is complex and encompasses ideas about law, place, custom, language, spiritual belief and Dreaming, cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity. It is often capitalised.

Culture

The accepted and traditionally patterned ways of behaving, and a set of common understandings shared by members of a group or community. Includes land, language, spirituality, ways of living and working, artistic expression, relationships and identity.

Custodian

A person charged with maintaining and passing on particular elements of cultural significance (e.g. knowledge, stories, songs, dances, language, ritual and imagery).

Customary law

Also referred to as 'lore', customary laws are based on traditions and customs of a particular group in a specific region.

Decolonisation

Describes the ending of colonisation and the liberation of those who were colonised. The process includes dismantling the 'colonial state' and its laws. The ultimate goal is self-determination of those who were colonised. Those pursuing decolonisation start by reconnecting with kin and country, and disengaging with the colonial system.

Discrimination

Unfair treatment on the basis of perceived differences between people.

Dreaming

The Dreaming has different meanings for different Aboriginal groups. The Dreaming can be seen as an embodiment of Aboriginal creation which gives meaning to everything. It establishes the rules governing relationships between the people, the land and all things for Aboriginal people.

Elder

Key go-to person within Aboriginal communities who is respected and consulted due to their experience, wisdom, knowledge, background and insight. Often described as the "custodians of knowledge" or the "libraries" of a community. Elder does not necessarily equate with age.

First Peoples

The term First Peoples is often used synonymously for *Aboriginal people* or *Indigenous people*.

Gubbament

Slang word for 'government'. A 'gubba' is a white person.

Heritage

That which comes or belongs to one by reason of birth, sometimes also understood as 'descent' when talking about identity.

Homeland

Homelands are located on Aboriginal ancestral lands with cultural and spiritual significance to the Aboriginal people who live there. Complex connections to land include cultural, spiritual and environmental obligations, including obligations for the protection of sacred sites.

Indigenous

Native to a place or area, originating in and characterising a particular region or country.

Indigenous Australians

Term used to refer to the original inhabitants of Australia; always capitalised. Includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Many Aboriginal people don't like to be referred to with this term.

Kinship

Kinship includes the importance of all relationships, and of being related to and belonging to the land.

Kwementyaye

A respectful term used after a person has died in lieu of their first name (Northern Territory).

Land rights

The struggle by Aboriginal people to gain acknowledgement of prior ownership of this land both legally and morally and allowing all the accompanying rights and obligations which stem from this association.

Land use

The way land and water are used and maintained both physically and spiritually. Modern land use can include non-Aboriginal parties.

Language group

Language is linked to particular geographical areas. The term 'language group' is often used in preference to the term 'tribe', and many Aboriginal people identify themselves through their language group.

Long Grass

Long Grass describes Aboriginal people living homeless and on the fringes, yet sometimes right in the middle of our cities. It comes from the tall grass usually growing on riverbanks where Aboriginal people often congregate.

Lore

The learning and transmission of cultural heritage. See also 'customary law'.

Mabo

Eddie Koiki Mabo, whose Murray Island land claim led the High Court to recognise, for the first time, that a form of land title existed prior to Australia's occupation by Great Britain in 1788. The High Court judgment, made in 1993, is usually referred to as the Mabo case.

Makarrata

Denotes a domestic treaty between the Commonwealth government and Aboriginal people. It comes from a word in the Yolngu language meaning a coming together after a struggle, facing the facts of wrongs and living again in peace.

Massacres

Indiscriminate killing of Aboriginal people by government forces, private killing parties and individuals.

Midden

An originally Danish word, now used for a large heap of shell and other food remains left by Aboriginal people at camp sites which built up over an extended period of time. Middens are often found near rock platforms and in proximity of fresh water.

Missions, "mish"

Areas originally set up and governed by different religious denominations for Aboriginal people to live. Missions implemented government policies. Aboriginal people associate the term with trauma suffered from forced living conditions and abuse, rarely with positive memories. Missions are often colloquially called "mish".

Mob

Colloquial term used by Aboriginal people to refer to a group of people they belong to, for example: "That is my mob over there." or "My mob comes from La Perouse."

NAIDOC

Stands for National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee.

Nation

A nation is a group of Aboriginal people who share the same language and area of land, river and sea that is their traditional land.

Native title

Form of land title which recognises Aboriginal people as rightful owners of that land. Involves a prolonged process which often ends in litigation before a court. Native Title (capitalised) refers to the legislation, whereas native title (lower case) refers to the concept.

National Native Title Tribunal

An independent statutory body to assist people to resolve native title issues.

Nip

'Nips' is a slang word for 'non-indigenous persons'.

Ochre

The word comes from an old French term *oker* or *ocer* meaning "pale yellow" but has evolved in the English language to refer to any pigment that is a product of processing minerals and mineral aggregate (rock and clay).

Racism

Discrimination on the basis of perceived racial differences. Racism takes on many forms, e.g. attitudinal, institutional or cultural.

Rarrk

The fine cross-hatching used by artists of western and central Arnhem Land. Similar patterns are known as *miny'tji* and *dhulang* in the region's east. The Arnhem Land (NT) artists Peter Maralwanga (1917–1987) and Yirawula (1897–1976) are considered the originators of this painting style. "They took the rarrk from the *mardayin* ceremony and they put it on bark," says John Mawurndjul, [1] himself a painter. Before that 'rarrk' referred exclusively to the cross-hatched patterns painted on the bodies of dancers and those undergoing initiation ceremonies. [1]

The patterns were said to physically connect initiates to the sacred power of the ancestral beings who made their clan lands,[2] and also used to identify clans in the region.

Reconciliation

A Commonwealth initiative to promote reconciliation between Aboriginal people and the wider community and to redress Aboriginal disadvantage.

Rellies, rellos

These are slang words for relatives.

Reserves

Areas of land reserved by the Crown for Aboriginal people in the 19th century. Much of this land was later taken from Aboriginal people again. Until the 1970s the remaining reserves were administered and controlled by government.

Scarred tree

A tree injured by Aboriginal people to extract a piece of bark for making a canoe, a shelter or utensil. Some trees have been marked for ceremonial purposes only.

Self-determination

When Aboriginal people determine their affairs themselves, including decision making, interacting with non-Aboriginal parties and creating the solution to a problem.

Site

Aboriginal sites are places of importance and significance to Aboriginal people because they provide a link to former or current traditions, people or practices.

Songline

A songline (also known as Dreaming Track) is a path across the land which marks the journey of creator-beings as they created the lakes, rivers, plants, land formations and living creatures during the Dreaming. Songlines are recorded in traditional songs, stories, dance, and painting. They explain the origins of the land and the laws people have to live by. One of Central Australia's oldest intact songlines called the Ngintaka, or Perentie Lizard, dreaming.

Sovereignty

Sovereignty is the ultimate power, authority and/or jurisdiction over a people and a territory. No other person, group, tribe or state can tell a sovereign entity what to do with its land and/or people. A sovereign entity can decide and administer its own laws, can determine the use of its land and can do pretty much as it pleases, free of external influence (within the limitations of international law). Sovereignty is a more precise term than self-determination.

Terra nullius

A concept in international law meaning 'a territory belonging to no-one' or 'over which no-one claims ownership'. The concept has been used to justify the invasion and colonisation of Australia.

Tiddas

A Koori word for 'sisters' that describes a sense of sisterhood, not just with Aboriginal women but women generally.

Torres Strait Islanders

Refers to the First Peoples of the Torres Strait region (as compared to the mainland Aboriginal people).

Traditional custodians / owners

'Traditional owners' is an English term from the *Northern Territory Land Rights Act* and refers to Aboriginal decision-making. It refers to a group of Aboriginal people who belong to a certain area of land ('country') and have the cultural obligation to maintain it.

The term 'custodians' considers that in Aboriginal culture the land owns its people (and not vice versa), while 'owners' gives credit to the fact that it is Aboriginal land (both terms are in use).

Treaty

A negotiated agreement with the government to recognise that Aboriginal people have not lost any part of their sovereign existence and status, and that they have always maintained a property right in land and the natural resources according to their law and customs.

Wandjina

Striking figure represented by people in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, featuring a halo effect around the face. Wandjinas are recognised as having a significant role in natural and spiritual events.

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